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ABSTRACT

In recent years data have begun to accumulate on the efficacy of role playing as an alternative to deception in research. The ethics of deception as a research technique are also being considered. The present study was designed to provide data describing subjects' post-participation attitudes toward research and researchers in comparable role playing and deception experimental conditions. Subjects were 214 students who were enrolled in eight introductory communication courses at Michigan State University, randomly assigned in intact classes to the experimental conditions, and who were participants in a communication experiment designed to determine the impact of a specific news event. One half of the students had been previously informed that this news event was to be a fabrication. All subjects were required to fill out two questionnaires, one which dealt with their response to the news and the other which concerned their response to having participated in the experiment. The study indicated that subjects in the deception condition were more favorable toward participation in the research and toward researchers than were subjects in the role playing conditions. (LL)

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DECEPTION vs. ROLE PLAYING

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SUBJECT ATTITUDES TOWARD RESEARCH AND RESEARCHERS:

DECEPTION vs. ROLE PLAYING

Social science disciplines are increasingly concerned with ethical issues associated with the conduct of research. The American Psychological Association lists and discusses ten ethical principles in its 1973 publication, "Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants." Similarly the American Sociologycal Association has published a formal code of ethics (1969), embodying 13 principles. A program at the 1974 annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association was devoted to "The Use of Human Subjects in Communication Research" (Bettinghaus, Greenberg, Hocking, Schreiman, Steinberg and Walker, 1974).

Deception of subjects in particular has been a focus of ethical attacks.(e.g., Baumrind, 1964; Kelman, 1967; Rosenthal, 1967). Kelman (1967, p. 5), for example, argues that:

> Serious ethical issues are raised by deception per se and the kind of use of human beings it implies. . . . Yet we seem to forget that the experimenter-subject relationship whatever else it is - is a real interhuman relationship, in which we have responsibility toward the subject as another human being whose dignity we must preserve . . . (p. 5).

Kelman advocates role playing as an alternative to deception. Role playing involves telling the subjects about a situation and asking them to respond as if they are "really" in that situation.

Data have begun to accumulate on the efficacy of role playing as an alternative to deception in research (Greenberg, 1967; Horowitz and Rothchild, 1970; Willis and Willis, 1970; Darroch and Steiner, 1970; Holmes and Bennett, 1974). This research focuses on whether role playing subjects provide responses which are comparable to those obtained with deception. Miller (1972), in a review of four studies focusing on this question, concludes that "the prospects for role playing as an alternative to deception are very poor" (p. 634).

Even defenders of deception research appear to agree with Kelman (1967) that deception per se is ethically inferior to role playing. They have defended deception on epistemological grounds. Role playing, they say, lacks realism. They argue that it is unlikely subjects in an Asch-type conformity experiment, or a Milgram-type obedience experiment, would role play the socially "negative" responses that the deceived subjects did in the original research. Freedman (1969) summarizes the argument against role playing:

> No amount of discussion of other aspects of role playing can conceal the one simple fact that this procedure provides information about what people think they would do,

> not necessarily what they would do. And experimental results are not always easy to predict; people do not always behave the way that they or we expect them to. (p. 110).

When subjects give researchers their time and responses, a frequent reason cited for justifying this effort is that knowledge in the area is advanced. It would be ethically questionable to waste subjects' time by failing to give them the opportunity to provide the best possible data. If the researcher takes the subjects' time and energy, it seems that he or she has an ethical responsibility to assure that these responses are likely to best advance knowledge in the area. If the quality of data provided by role playing subjects is inferior to that provided by their deceived counterparts (a conclusion that the arguments and literature in the area seem to warrant), role playing may in some situations be ethically inferior to deception. This would be particularly true in situations in which no harm was likely to result from either the deception or its revelation. In short, ethical questions may also be raised by the use of role playing as an alternative to deception in research.

No amount of armchair speculation will resolve whether deception per se is ethically inferior to role playing. Kelman (1967) and other critics of deception in research may or may not be right. The "real inter-human" experimenter-subject relationship of which Kelman speaks may or may not be jeopardized by the use of deception per se, independent of its nature and seriousness. It is conceivable that subjects might feel more exploited by role playing research. Role playing also might jeopardize the "real inter-human relationship" between experimenter and subject. In the absence of data, we, like Kelman, can only speculate. The present study was designed to provide data describing subjects' post-participation attitudes toward research and researchers in comparable role playing and deception experimental conditions.

METHOD

Subjects: Subjects were 214 male and female students enrolled in eight introductory communication courses at Michigan State University. They were randomly assigned in intact classes to the experimental conditions.

Procedure: Subjects were participants in a communication experiment designed to determine the impact of a specific news event. (The results of this phase of the research are reported in Gantz and Miller [1974].) About five minutes after the class sessions began, the experimenter knocked on the door and asked the instructor to step outside. The instructor had previously given permission for the research to be conducted. After a few seconds both the instructor and experimenter entered the classroom and the experimenter announced that (then incumbent) "Vice-President Spiro Agnew has just been indicted for bribery by a grand jury in Maryland [or cleared of all allegations against him]".

Before this message, half the subjects were told that the event which was about to be announced to them had really not taken place; that they should pretend that it had as they filled out the questionnaire. To increase the plausibility of the news announcement in the deception conditions, these subjects were told that the questionnaire had been prepared several days earlier in anticipation of such an event. This yielded a two (role play/deception) by two (cleared/indicted) factorial design.

All subjects then filled out a questionnaire designed to measure their attitudes toward Agnew, their desire to talk to people about this event, and so on. This questionnaire took about ten minutes to complete, after which time it was collected. Then a one page debriefing sheet was handed out which informed subjects that "the news event we have just told you about has not taken place." On this sheet subjects responded to two questions designed to measure the dependent variables: "How do you feel about having participated in this experiment?" and, "How do you feel about people who plan and run experiments like this?". The answers were scaled from "very favorable" (7) to "very unfavorable" (1). Subjects in the deception conditions were also asked whether they believed that Agnew really had been indicted (or cleared). Eight subjects indicated that they did not, and were dropped from the analysis.

After these measures were collected, subjects were fully debriefed verbally by the authors and any questions they had were answered.

Results and Discussion

Subjects in the deception conditions were more favorable towards participation in the research than were subjects in the role playing conditions ($p < .05$). Subjects in the deception conditions were also more favorable towards "people who plan and run experiments like this" than were subjects in the role playing conditions although this difference did not reach significance ($p < .2$). Tables one and two summarize these results.

Tables 1 & 2 about here

These results are quite surprising. Both the defenders and the critics of deception in research have seemed to assume that role playing was ethically superior to deception. Of course the fact that subjects were more favorable towards the deception conditions of this study does not necessarily make these conditions more ethical than the role playing conditions. Ethical standards are not necessarily derived from what people like. However, if, as Kelman (1967) has suggested, one reason that deception per se is less ethical than role playing is that it jeopardizes the experimenter/subject relationship, these results might be viewed as questioning this assumption. This research used a relatively minor deception and it is unknown how generalizable these findings are. But the critics of deception argue that it is deception per se that is

ethically questionable. The results of this research indicate that subjects do not necessarily agree.

Several post hoc explanations may account for these results. Filling out questionnaires is not an especially interesting task for most people. The subjects who role played this study had someone walk into their class and give them a questionnaire to fill out. This is an event which occurs regularly in basic communication courses at Michigan State University. Subjects in the role playing condition may have been somewhat bored by it. On the other hand, subjects in the deception conditions had someone enter their classrooms and announce that Agnew had just been indicted (or cleared). This sort of thing rarely happens and was probably quite interesting. When they later were told that the event had not really taken place, this did not change the relative interestingness of their participation up until that point. Since the nature of the deception was not serious, there were probably few, if any, ill feelings resulting from participation. In general, most people probably feel more positive toward participating in interesting activities than in boring ones. This could account for the more favorable evaluation of participation in the deception conditions.

Another possible explanation is that subjects do indeed have an intuitive feel for the value of the data they provide. Those in the role playing condition may have felt uncertain about their responses to some of the questions since they were only pretending. In filling out the questionnaire they might have wondered, "What good are my answers if I don't really know how I would feel if Agnew really had been completely cleared (or indicted)." If they indeed felt this way, they may have been less favorable towards participating in the research. People in general do not like to feel like their time is being wasted.

Subjects were also more favorable toward participation when they had been told Agnew had been indicted than when told he had been cleared. Since the overall sample tended to have unfavorable attitudes toward Agnew (Gantz and Miller, 1974), subjects were more favorable when the deception provided them with pleasant information. However, role playing subjects were also more favorable when they were pretending that Agnew had been indicted then when pretending he had been cleared. Thus the nature of both the deception and the role playing situation affected subjects' attitudes toward participation in the research.

This study used one specific deception situation. Obviously, more research is needed to determine the impact of other kinds of deception on subjects' attitudes toward research and researchers. Also, other dependent variables should be explored as indicants of jeopardy to the relationship between the experimenter and the subject. The results of the present study, however, are surprising and suggestive. They demonstrate that role playing by social scientists may be an inadequate way of determining subject attitudes about participation in research using deception.

FOOTNOTE

1. A problem with this procedure is that since it was intact classes which were randomly assigned to conditions, and not individuals, using the individual as the unit of analysis violates the assumption of independence of observations. Unfortunately it was not logistically feasible to assign individuals at random to conditions, or to use enough separate intact classes to allow the class means to be used as the unit of analysis. The reader is alerted to this design problem and the subsequent shortcoming of the analysis.

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Table 1

Subject Attitudes Toward Participation in Each Experimental Condition

		Means and Standard Deviations[a]		
		Agnew Cleared	Agnew Indicted	Total M
Role play	M	3.35	3.65	3.50
	SD	.94	.87	
Deception	M	3.63	4.02	3.83
	SD	1.04	.91	
Total	M	3.49	3.84	

Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	dF	MS	F
Role play/Deception (A)	4.89	1	4.89	5.42*
Cleared/Indicted (B)	5.57	1	5.56	6.16*
A x B	.09	1	.09	<1
Error	162.57	180		
Total	173.11	183		

[a] The higher the numbers, the more favorable the attitudes. Subjects were randomly deleted to create equal cell sizes, N = 46 per cell.

* $p < .05$

Table 2

Subject Attitudes Toward Researchers

Who "plan and conduct experiments like this."

Means and Standard Deviations

		Agnew Cleared	Agnew Indicted	Total M
Role play	M	3.74	3.61	3.67
	SD	1.14	1.36	
Deception	M	3.80	3.96	3.88
	SD	.88	.87	
Total	M	3.77	3.78	

Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	dF	MS	F
Role play/Deception (A)	1.96	1	1.96	1.67*
Cleared/Indicted (B)	.01	1	.01	<1
A x B	.92	1	.92	<1
Error	210.97	180	1.17	
Total	213.86	183		

* $p < .2$